

STRUT OF POLITICAL EVENTS AND DISAVOWAL OF BORDERS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S 'THE HUNGRY TIDE'

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's novels are the epitome of postcolonial concepts trumpeting the thought of persistent inevitable crossing of boundaries and with the denunciation of borders and boundaries. Ghosh's The Hungry Tide (2004) centers on crossing of boundaries and the shadowiness of existing borders. The inhabitants of the novel are the refugees who crossed over from East Pakistan to India in the forties and fifties. The novel exposes the desolate struggle of people to stay alive on the distressed islands of anguish and peril in the Bay of Bengal. The locale of the novel is a horrible borderless space in terms of geographical scope. In the land, the boundaries between the land and the water always go on altering with the changing natural phenomena "where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable". (THT p. 7). In such circumstances, the refugees found themselves in a state of confrontation against the Indian government that fails to look after them. It is declared that Morichjhapi was illegally inhabited by the refugees of Bangladesh. Calling upon the need to guard forest and wildlife reserves, the government harassed, endangered, and even killed these refugees. People were suppressed and so they migrated from place to place and continued to make their homes in low-lying areas because they felt that they were unwanted. Government undertook a mission to expel people from the island and this resulted in an encounter between the government and the people in which thousands of refugees were killed in 1979. Even in such a worst situation, Ghosh portrays a nonaligned space of cosmopolitan disagreements and its associated problems being resolved without any biases due to the acceptance of global culture. The settlers accept the place with its limitations. The novel The Hungry Tide stands as proof of Ghosh's inclusive vision of human worth through the stories of one of the least known communities in the world.

KEYWORDS: Postcolonial, Morichjhapias & Perilin

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INTRODUCTION

Borders and boundaries are the important ideas portrayed in postcolonial novels. As a reflection of the era, in delineating the borderline between history and fiction, Ghosh has developed a mode of writing, which, despite the nonspecific variety of his works, repeatedly returns to issues that are generated as central to present-day global experience in a susceptible and stimulating way. It is through evocation of globality and endless placements across the globe that man has to strike a chord of the survival of globe as a one total and single phenomenon immunized by the shifting borders and frontiers forced through several wars and violence in the post-colonial era. A postmodern writer in many respects, Ghosh's achievement is in taking the readers into the edifice of history, discover those forgotten within, and lay bare the feelings that are obscured by facts. Amitav Ghosh's novels are the epitome of postcolonial concepts trumpeting the thought of persistent inevitable crossing of boundaries and with the rejection or a denunciation of borders and boundaries. Ghosh's frequent themes are the role of individual or mob in the broad sweep of political events and dubious nature of borders and peoples. In **The Hungry Tide**,

Ghosh aims at politics and people.

Amitav Ghosh's **The Hungry Tide** (2004) centers on the shadowiness of existing borders. The locale of the novel is cramped into a horrible borderless space in terms of geographical scope. It is set in the Sunderbans, the "tide country" of Southern Bengal, in the deltas of the Ganga and Brahmaputra Rivers. It has "tide people", whose lives are designed and decided by nature and beasts of prey. The inhabitants of such unpredictable place are the refugees who crossed over from East Pakistan in the forties and fifties. The novel exposes the desolate struggle of people to stay alive on the distressed islands of anguish and peril in the Bay of Bengal. The tide water, the mangrove forest, tigers, Crocodiles and Dolphins are the salient features of the land leading to the intangible question of how human beings share their abode with such a frightful, dangerous and complex wild animals like dolphins and tigers. In such circumstances, they found themselves in a state of confrontation against the Indian government that fails to look after them.

Ghosh's poignant description of the tide country is quite laudable. The setting of the novels is the landscape of Sundarbans meaning 'the beautiful forest'. It is named after a common species of mangrove, the Sundari tree. This tide country is spreading from the river Hooghly in West Bengal to the shores of Meghna River in Bangladesh. The residents label the island as "Bhaitradesh"—the tide country. The Sundarbans, a relatively uninhabited isolated group of islands in the Ganges Delta is domicile of constant floods. In fact, the unvarying flooding is almost quixotic in its description in the following passage:

'The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily—some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before.' (THT, p. 7)

The fluctuating boundaries of the landscape as well as the living scenario of the island create a sense of insecurity and fear.

The nature has designed the island in such a way that it is uninhabitable. There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. In addition, some islands are "Between the sea and the plains of Bengal, on the easternmost coast of India, lies an immense archipelago of islands. Immense and some are no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others were washed into being just a year or two ago". (*The Hungry Tide*, p. 7) The boundaries between the land and the water always go on altering with the changing natural phenomena "where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable". (THT p. 7). Some river channels are tremendously wide and long and it is hard to make out their shores and these clustered channels of rivers confluence to create massive water force that structure the topography of the place. The unknown tide country proffers no evident borders between the river and the sea, and sometimes not even between land and water. It is indeed alarming to the people who witness the scene of thousands of acres of land vanishing in a regular cycle. In such a precarious place, people survive, along with man-eating tigers, crocodiles, and the thick treacherous mangroves that reappear in a modified version as in a magic shows after a certain period of time. With this gloomy backdrop of alternating frontiers of water and land, Ghosh artistically presents the theme of the murkiness of existing borders and boundaries. The physical boundary is not out of harm's way in the perilous island.

The minds of the people of the island are tuned to the perilous nature of its physical features. People settle in the new land accepting its boundaries and topography. **The Hungry Tide** says, "In the tide country girls were brought up on

the assumption that if they are married, they would be widowed in their twenties- their thirties if they were lucky. This assumption was woven, like a skein of dark wool, into the fabric of their lives: when the men folk went fishing it was the custom for their wives to change into the garments of widowhood." {The Hungry Tide, p.80}. The water in and around the land as well as the animals also are a threat to the people of Sundarbans. They lead a "threatened life" because of the Bengali tigers. Nilima points out to the number of people killed as she says "my belief is that over a hundred people are killed by tigers here each year. And, mind you, I am just talking about the Indian part of the Sundarbans. If you include the Bangladesh side, the figure is probably twice that. If you put the figures together, it means that a human being is killed by a tiger every other day in the Sundarbans.(Hungry Tide 199) Considering the number of people killed by tigers in the Sundarbans, it is no surprise to see Fokir "in the front ranks of the crowd, helping a man sharpen a bamboo pole" (Hungry Tide 243). This state of insecurity has created a feeling of alienation pervades among the inhabitants of the land.

Ghosh's depiction of the Sundarbans focuses not only on the deserted lonely islands and the adjacent natural space that is pooled with the revulsions of tiger attacks and floods, but also on the space where the people are denied of their rights to occupy the land. The territory is declared to be illegally inhabited by the refugees of Bangladesh. The people feel insecure because of threat from the politicians who rule the land in the name of government. It is obvious that their problems are not deciphered by the politicians or personnel of social welfare organizations. On the contrary, the problems are intensified from all corners. Scathingly, the rudiments and the politics of the land turn people's faith into ridiculous fact. The land that is denied to the refugees is not a haven of pleasure and comfort. However, the government is not willing to let them live in peace. They are continuously chased from their place of survival. They are deprived of their right to live in the island with a concern of protecting the tigers. This threat is equally perilous as the unpredictable animal attacks. The plight of the refugees is pathetic and heart rendering. In the lands of Sundarbans, the freedom and identity of the individual are confined.

People came to the island in three different time period: in 1920's, in 1947 after the partition of the country and then in 1971 after the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan. The first settled island is Lusibari which is in the southern most of all the inhabited islands of Sundarbans. The bushy island was not habitable at all in the initial stage and it was made habitable by Daniel Hamilton in 1920s and he named this island Lusibari after his wife Lucy. The island clearly points out the cross-cultural correlation as Lucy is the name of British woman and bari in Bangla means house. So Lusibari means Lucy's house. Nirmal and Nilima, Kanai's uncle and aunt settled in Lusibari in 1950 with the forecast of restructuring the life in island. Nilima took the enterprise to bring the change in the lives of the people of Lushibari for their betterment. She originated Badabon Trust. Nirmal and Nilima thought to bring a change in the lives of refugees who had taken shelter in Morichjhapi Island. The initial migrants mainly representing well connected upper classes.

In 1971, following partition, many Hindu East Bengalis migrated to India to break away from maltreatment in their homeland. People who had lost their home in East Pakistan sought shelter in Sundarbans of Morichjhapi after the partition of Bangladesh. Before they had sheltered in Morichjhapi, they were forcibly made to stay as refugees at a place called Dandakamya in Madhya Pradesh. These rustic people are the highly browbeaten Dalits who were the poorest of the poor. They were from the lower strata of society- the *namasudras*- with little or no resources of their own. Naturally these people were seen as economic liabilities and forced to settle in hastily made rehabilitation zones like those of Dandakaranya- their "dumping site" (Bauman 77). The migrants are trained in the methods of paddy farming, fishing and carpentry, these were unable to adapt to the arid infertile soil of central India. The poverty stricken Hindus who ran from the Muslim county were doubly exploited by Muslims and upper caste Hindus. The refugees considered that resettlement

camp as prison and undergone immeasurable complicatedness as they did not know the language of the residents of that area who treated them as intruders. They were forcibly kept in refugee camp in Central India. Police always forbade them to go out of the camp area, so, they felt like incarcerated. In 1978 the refugees organized themselves and appalled against the police, and in due course moved to Morichjhapi with the purpose of settling there. The refugees originally from the Khulna district of East Bengal, started marching to Morichjhapi, an uninhabited island in Sundarbans with the hope that the new Communist government would fulfil its promise, having supported their cause earlier. Kudaisya points out how the “political ascendancy of the Left owed a great deal to the refugees” who were encouraged to seek shelter within Bengal (32). However in a dramatic reversal of policy, the JyotiBasu government now refused to entertain their demands.

Calling upon the need to guard forest and wildlife reserves, the government harassed, endangered, and even killed these refugees. Many East Bengalis attempted to remake their lives in India's Sundarbans as they had nowhere else to go. **Professor Ray Tarassays,**

“Socio-economic class--and caste and race--are involved in policy making that every so often privileges nature at the expense of human beings. Ghosh elaborates: "Was it possible that in Morichjhāpi had been planted the seeds of what might become, if not a Dalit nation, then at least a safe haven, a place of true freedom for the country's most oppressed?" (p.159). That "natural" disasters usually have human agency is described in a typology that follows.” (168-171). **Sunday, August 27, 2006.**

(<http://americareads.blogspot.com/2006/08/amitav-ghosh-hungry-tide.html>)

People were suppressed and so they migrated from place to place and continued to make their homes in low-lying areas because they felt that they were unwanted. It was through Kanai's reading of a diary written by Nirmal that readers are acquainted with the massacre of Morichjhapi. Government undertook a mission to expel people from the island and this resulted in an encounter between the government and the people in which thousands of refugees were killed in 1979. Nirmal died soon after this massacre.

In Morichjhapi, People have to fight for their identity and the rights on physical space in the new land though it was insecure. The condition in the new land is worse than the situation in their homeland. Every day passed with the news of someone being killed by a tiger, a snake or a crocodile or by the government. The refugees toiled a lot to convert an unkempt land into exquisite habitable place. They did a commendable job of providing basic amenities to the setting up of organizations, institutions and their own government. They divided the island into various zones and even concerned with census of the refugees. Nirmal uttered his positive reception of their work in the words, "I stood transfixed, I felt something was changing within me, how astonishing it was that I, an aging, bookish school master, should live to see this, an experiment, imagined not by those with learning and power, but by those without". (The Hungry Tide), p. 171. It obviously demonstrates how displacement and relocation from the native soil lead them to endeavor the hardship, amend, rebuild and modify the existing worst situation with determination and acculturate and rejuvenate their lost culture of past homeland at the settled locale. People have created a rich oral culture of tradition, song and legend despite the bitter situations. They have created a rich oral culture of tradition, song and legend. Their quest for survival has made them cross such man made borders and fight for their life which is under constant threat. Even in the worst situation, Ghosh portrays a nonaligned space of cosmopolitan disagreements and its associated problems being resolved without any biases due to the acceptance of global culture. The boundaries of religion and cultures are not defined in the novel. People of the island are not bothered about the boundaries like religion, caste and creed that encompass the existing culture of the place.

The insecurity inflicted on them by nature is inevitable and can be managed by prudence to a certain extent. However the cruelty done by human to human in the name of government is bitterer than everything else. The mockery was that government was unwilling to permit the refugees to settle in the land of eternal danger. The drastic changes in the settled land tells that subalterns are intelligent and hardworking and they can establish their resilience if sanctioned with ample and right opportunities. The government does not recognize the potentials of the settlers. With the hope of getting foreign aid and on the assumed reason of protection of wild animals, the charlatan bureaucrats and dull headed elected representatives compelled the refugees to evacuate the place. As they tried to uproot the refugees from the settlement, confrontations between the government forces and the settlers intensified leading to serious consequences. The government which was there to do welfare to refugees inflicted many tactful measures to make them leave the island themselves. For instance, the settlers were detained to drink contaminated water as the police destroyed their tube wells which are the main sources of potable water left though the land is surrounded by massive water force. They were clogged from fetching rice and water to Morichjhapi. Their boats were drowned and people were killed.

The deteriorated people were not permitted to bring food into the islands which are not suitable for cultivation. So, they were reduced to eat wild grass. The oppressed people's groan is totally rejected and the government vindicated its actions. The state imposed an economic blockade and sunk the boats of the islanders thereby reducing Morichjhapi to a panopticon-like structure. The settlers were enforced to drink water from the puddles and ponds resulting in a swipe of Cholera. While most people died of starvation and cholera, others were killed in police firing and arson attacks. Ross Mallick writes how Muslim thugs were also hired from Bangladesh to execute the mass killings (110). They were deaf to the appeal of the refugees: "We need to let people know what we are doing and why we are here. We have to tell the world about all we have done and all we have achieved". (The Hungry Tide, p. 172) The poor people were ready to endure hardship in the clutches of the tyrants rather than leaving the land. They say, "We will not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may". (The Hungry Tide p.254). This endangered the peaceful life of the oppressed by inflaming horror in their mind and evoking sense of diasporic consciousness.

Ghosh who analyses the political and socio economic factors of mass migration throws light on the impact of displacement on individuals also. Ghosh states that the sense of uprootedness has created a pandemonium in the life of each migrant through his effective rendering of the emotional may he munder went by them. The exasperation and suffering of the migrants is expressed in the words of Kusum: "...the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, was worthless than dirt or dust. It has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? To me that this whole world has become a place of animals and our fault, our crime was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings. No human being could think this a crime. This is how humans have always lived by fishing, by clearing and by planting the soil. (The Hungry Tide, p. 161-62) The refugees miserably asked the question, "Who indeed, are we? Where do we belong?" {The Hungry Tide, p. 259) The question of identity was clinging on them miserably.

The story of the individuals reflects the eternal sufferings of man who is tossed between two countries. It was indeed a great psychological trauma when people were made to feel that they were not sought after and their presence was insignificant. Though they try to acculturate themselves and acclimatize to current scenario, the government

insists that the settlers have no rights over the physical borders. The alarming truth was that the government mercilessly butchered thousands of refugees. The settlers were regarded outsiders and so they were turned out by government in May, 1979. The emotional wounds created by migration took a long time to get healed and had left a deep scar in their heart. The novels highlight man's search for identity and roots in the ramshackle of history. "The barriers of nation, country and time dissolve in the consciousness of the author, and he reaches a tragic realization of how unscrupulous political forces continue to suffocate human aspirations". (153) says **Sharmila Guha Majumdar**, in the essay "**Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines and In an Antique Land: Some Thematic Considerations**".

The concepts of the Western World are imposed on the people without considering the local needs for the survival leading to humiliation of the residents. It is agonizing that the government took the lives of refugees in a very careless way as it prefers to run after a foreign ideology of development. This is explicit through the words of Kanai "It was people like you who made a push to protect the wild life here, without regard for the human costs. And I am complicit because people like me-Indians of my class, curry favour with their Western patrons." {*The Hungry Tide* /? 301}. Piya poke this because she was unaware of the situation prevailing in Sundarbans. Piya also raised a question here "Everywhere in the world dozens of people are killed every day- on roads, in cars, in traffic, why is this any worse." {*The Hungry Tide*, p.301}. There were some good spirited people like Nirmal and Nilima who devoted themselves for the welfare of the people of Lusibari. However, except a few, there was no one to voice forth the rights of the refugees.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh has strained to draw distinct line between the powerful and powerless. Violence is imposed on the people in the form of power. In West Bengal, when the left Front government was in power, refugee settlers were dispossessed forcibly from the island. They were powerless before the power of government. They had no food to eat, no water to drink. There was no one to help them because, ". . . anyone suspected of helping them was sure to get into trouble" (THT.122). The powerless people do not have a voice. The powerless, impoverished and poor people become easy prey for these wild creatures such as tigers, snakes and crocodiles. They cannot formulate any mechanism to get themselves heard and understood, and no one pays interest to their quandary. Nature also plays its role as powerful, as the island is under continuous threat from cyclones and tides. But if nature is a destroyer it also acts as defence for the survivors. The Mangroves forest ". . . served as a barrier against nature's fury, absorbing the initial onslaught of cyclonic winds, waves and tidal surges" (286). If they were not present in the islands, the tide country would have drowned long before. Bangladeshi refugees, along with Kusum, Fokir, Moyna and Horen are presented in this novel as powerless and Government, Nature, wild animals are mighty and powerful.

CONCLUSIONS

The Hungry Tide functions as Ghosh's political messenger, being published in the very year when the Bengal government dispossessed fishermen from the island of Jambudwip to start a tourism project. Ghosh is spiteful over the denial of space in India for East Bengal refugees, particularly Muslims who are regarded "transnational migrants". They were rejected by both India and Bangladesh as economic liabilities (Ramachandran 14). Recalling the Morichjhapi massacre, he writes: "It is scarcely conceivable that a government run by the same Left Front is now thinking of handing over a substantial part of the Sunderbans to an industrial house like the Sahara Parivar" ("A Crocodile"). Nonetheless, Ghosh who depicted the endless sufferings of the settlers of Morichjhapi, ends the novel on an optimistic note. And that points to the need to have a story which is not anthropocentric. Ghosh's declares: "The one place where tigers have held their own is in the Sundarbans where, despite an inordinate number of animal-related fatalities, people still

display a general willingness to coexist with the species—for which more is due, in all probability, to the Bon Bibi legend than to any governmental project” (Ghosh, WF). The novel **The Hungry Tide** stands as proof of Ghosh's inclusive vision of human worth through the stories of one of the least known communities in the world.

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